

DESOLATION ROW – FOREST HILLS

Sometimes Dylan's rearrangements of his song are shockingly bold, like the rock version of "One Too Many Mornings" that featured on the 1966 tour (and allegedly inspired the famous "Judas!" remark from the audience in Manchester that became a part of Dylan mythology). But sometimes the rearrangements are much more subtle – simple intonation can turn an angry song into a sympathetic one.

And sometimes, the audience reaction can change the tone of a song, in such a way that it allows the listener, and possibly Dylan himself, to consider the song in an entirely new way.

In August of 1965, a few weeks had passed since Dylan "went electric" at the Newport Folk Festival, to the boos of the disapproving crowd, while Pete Seeger grabbed an axe and had to be restrained from cutting the cable. Or, anyway, that's how the story goes.

In reality, there are some doubts as to what people were really upset about. Some say that the booing wasn't because of the music, it was that Dylan, the headliner, left the stage after only three songs. Others insist that it was simply terrible sound quality.

In a radio interview 35 years later, Seeger allowed that "electric music isn't my favorite kind," but said that what upset him was that the instruments were too loud, obscuring the words. "Bob's words are important!" he said. But the engineers ignored his requests to turn the sound down, telling him "this is the way Bob wants it." At this point, he says, "I said 'if I had an axe, I'd cut the cable!'" giving birth to the legends. He's repeated this version of the story several times (though he's also been known to say that his wife doesn't believe him).

But whatever happened, there were boos, and some people undoubtedly booed because of the electric guitars. More importantly, as reports of the fiasco filtered through the world through word of mouth, many fans got the message that if Dylan played electric, you were supposed to boo.

The first full concert appearance came a month later, at the Forest Hills Tennis Stadium in New York, where Dylan had previously appeared as a guest of Joan Baez. Many in the crowd came looking for a fight.

Before the show even began, local DJ (and self-styled "fifth beatle") Murray the K took the stage and launched into one of the corniest introductions ever afforded a major artist: "It ain't rock, it ain't folk. It's a new

kind of thing called Dylan...and Dylan is definitely 'what's happening, baby,'". Some have detected a note of embarrassment in Murray's voice, particularly when he shoe-horns his catchphrase in, but he couldn't have been more embarrassed than the audience, who booed him back to the stone age. But they'd gotten the message: this wasn't folk music.

But when Dylan appeared onstage, it was alone, with an acoustic guitar. The only existing tape of the show is very rough, but the first half is quite listenable. Though many in the audience failed to realize it, the Forest Hills tape is very much a document of Dylan in the midst of one of the most creative periods in his career. At this show, he would debut several new songs, as well as new arrangements of "I Don't Believe You" and "It Ain't Me Babe," and, in hindsight, one realizes that, fresh from recording *Highway 61 Revisited*, his head was already swimming with ideas for *Blonde on Blonde* (indeed, the brief harmonica solo that opens the first song, "She Belongs to Me," sounds almost exactly the introduction to the album version of the soon-to-be-written "Visions of Johanna.") At his most recent full concert, three months before, he had still been in his "protest singer" phase. Now, he was embarking on a new phase of his career that went far beyond merely "going electric."

The crowd, judging from the tape, is appreciative for the first four songs, "She Belongs to Me," "To Ramona," "Gates of Eden," and "Love Minus Zero/No Limit." But by "Gates of Eden," they seem a bit restless. There's a lot of nervous muttering between the songs.

After "Love Minus Zero," though, Dylan pauses for a few seconds to retune, then does something that gets a brief laugh from the crowd (possibly fumbling with his harmonica holder), before speaking to the crowd for the first time. "This song," he says, "is called 'Desolation Row.'"

"Desolation Row" was only a few weeks old at the time; the album had not yet been released, meaning that everyone in the crowd was hearing it for the first time. Unlike every other audience that would ever hear Dylan perform the song, none of them had heard the dark, apocalyptic take that ends side 2 of *Highway 61 Revisited*.

At Forest Hills, Dylan began singing the song with essentially the same intonation as he had used when recording the song, but this time, something he may not

have expected happens: the crowd began to laugh after the third line, "the beauty parlor is filled with sailors."

It's jarring, at first, to hear people laughing at "Desolation Row." Knowing what we know about the Forest Hills crowd in hindsight, one immediately assumes that they're laughing derisively at Dylan's attempt to be serious without being quite as political.

But the laughs are genuine. You might never have realized it from the album version or from subsequent live renditions, but "Desolation Row" is a hilarious song.

The crowd laughs at the idea of a beauty parlor full of sailers, then even harder at the image of a blind commissioner with one hand tied to the tight rope walker, the other in his pants. They laugh when Dylan says "Cinderella she seems so easy," and harder when she smiles and says "it takes one to know one." There's spontaneous applause at the end of the second verse.

By now the crowd is even laughing at lines that aren't particularly comical, like "after the ambulances go." Even on the rough tape, one notices a distinct, if subtle, change in Dylan's delivery: having noticed that the crowd is laughing, he begins to play the song up as a comedy. There seems to be a wry smile behind every line, particularly those that he knows will get a laugh.

Of particular note is the "Einstein disguised as Robin Hood" verse, which cracks the audience up, until he gets to the last line: "now you would not think to look at him, but he was famous long ago for playing electric violin on Desolation Row."

The laughter builds up from the second he sings the word "electric" and builds into thunderous applause. The line may or may not be a reference to what had happened to Newport (it's best not to try to assume these things when it comes to Dylan), but the Forest Hills crowd certainly thinks it was. To them, this line seems like a self-deprecating joke; Dylan is saying "wasn't that goofy when I tried to play electric guitar? Ha! What was I thinking? Sorry about that!"

From this moment on, through the rest of the song (and the first set), Dylan has the crowd eating out of his hands. The laughter through the rest of the song gets louder, and Dylan's delivery gets sound more and more like he's presenting the song as a comedy. You can almost hear the grin on the tape. To them, the whole ugly episode of playing electric is now something in the past that everyone can laugh about.

The crowd then cheers their way through "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," and "Mr. Tambourine Man" (the two acoustic songs he had returned to the stage to play at Newport). One person on the tape shouts. "Let's hear some more!" and Dylan says "it's not my voice that sounds like this, it's the wind. Haha. It's all the wind."

Then, of course, Bob leaves the stage for a brief intermission, another local DJ comes out to be booed as the equipment for the second half – the electric half – is brought onstage. One can hear the crowd muttering "electric guitar...electric guitar" the way people at the singing competition in "The Sound of Music" say "third reich...third reich."

Dylan launches into "Tombstone Blues," a song just about as funny as "Desolation Row" and every bit as rooted in the folk/blues tradition as "Baby Let Me Follow You Down," but the crowd alternates between sitting quietly and shouting their disapproval. The words were distinguishable (at least they are on the tape, of which the electric half is of fairly poor quality). There are some scattered shouts of approval during the song, but as the song ends, boos drown out any other song.

Three other new songs would be debuted that night: "From a Buick Six," "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," and "Ballad of a Thin Man." But, having thought that Dylan had learned his lesson, and learned to laugh at himself, part of the crowd (a very large part) feels betrayed all over again.

But Dylan, of course, never looked back. At the next concert, at the Hollywood Bowl, the recording in circulation comes from a much clearer board tape, on which the audience is barely audible, but Dylan's delivery of "Desolation Row" sounds funny right from the start (and the crowd can be heard laughing from time to time). By Spring of 1966, though, he was back to playing it as a dark, brooding song – and not a chuckle can be heard from the crowd.